

# Hitting trees, saying 'No!' — it's all in a day's work

By Vicki French-Lankarge

The Registry of Motor Vehicles inspector had made up her mind. The young man beside her had failed his road test.

On Prospect Street, it had taken him several tries to turn around the driver's education car, and the state's manual for new drivers calls for the maneuver to be completed in three cuts of the wheel.

"At the end of the street, he suddenly stepped on the gas," said Officer Joan Grueling, her blue eyes widening as she recalled one memorable road test she gave last year.

"We whipped around the corner and went into a tree. It happened so fast that I only had time to grab the dashboard to prevent myself from going through the windshield."

No one was injured in the collision, and the car only received some minor damage. "But I drove the car back to the registry myself," Grueling added, firmly tapping a pencil on her office desk.

In addition to her other duties at the registry office on King Street, which include investigating serious accidents, Grueling's job is to conduct licensing exams for drivers. She rides with 18 "examinees" a day — three an hour — through some of the city's most congested streets.

"It can be tedious," admitted the 38-year-old inspector. "However, on the days when three-quarters of the people fail and there are some close calls, my stomach gets upset . . . and yet I'm not a nervous person."

Grueling then broke into a grin. "Otherwise, I wouldn't sleep at night!"

A native of Northampton who was a driver education instructor before she joined the Registry office here in 1979, she said it is the "unknown factor" that often makes the administering of the road tests difficult.

"These people are strangers and some times English is not their native language," she said. "They're supposed to be ready for a license, but how do I know that? I have less than three miles in which to make an unbiased opinion."

The red-haired officer affirmed that she usually can tell in the parking lot outside the registry office when an examinee is going to have trouble during the test.

"Especially with the kids," Grueling said with a smile. "The knees are shaking, the hands are in a death grip on the wheel and then they keep grinding the ignition. I can sympathize with their nerves. The peer pressure to get a license is enormous and I know my uniform — with the holstered gun — is intimidating. It seems some people are even more intimidated by a woman in uniform than a man."

However, Grueling does not be-



**She's smiling now, but some of the things drivers have done when registry officer Joan Grueling has gone out with them for license tests have not been funny. Sometimes, her work can be downright dangerous, she says. (Photo by Vicki French-Lankarge)**

lieve she is any tougher than any of her male colleagues.

"If you get a license from me — from any inspector here — you've earned it," she said. "Besides, I never failed anybody, they failed themselves."

Grueling said the examinees in various age groups react differently to failing the test. She said young women sometimes cry and young men get mad at themselves and they may bang their fists on her desk.

"The adults, especially those who had their licenses taken away for one reason or another, are apt to be more vocal about license denial," Grueling said. "You know what I mean when I say 'vocal,'" she added.

Grueling is amused by the examinees who phone the registry on the day of their road test and ask, "It's raining (or snowing) today. Are you still holding road tests?"

She also finds some of the examinees' reasoning about their failures funny.

"Most often, they tell me the last

inspector failed them because they were driving too slow," she said. "I just tell them, 'Well, today you exceeded the speed limit!'"

As for passing her road test, Grueling advises the examinees to look beyond her uniform and see her as a housewife and mother, and not to anticipate her commands during the test.

She also expects them to come to complete stops at stop signs. "No Hollywood rolls," she warned, wagging her finger.

She also said that learning to drive is like a marriage between the student and the car. "You have to work at it everyday," Grueling asserted.

Would Grueling ever go back to teaching people how to drive?

"No way," she answered quickly. "Teaching a novice to drive is like teaching a baby to talk. I didn't like starting from scratch with a student. I admire teachers who can work with novices all day long — especially inside 4,000 pounds of metal that can kill you in a flash."